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The Canning Plant

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The Canning Plant

Cover Page Footnote

Excerpted from The Forgotten Condition of Things, a novel from Flat Bay Press (2001).

The Canning Plant

In the dirt lot of the Canning Plant, bordered thickly in weeds flecked with paper and polyethylene, she and Richard open their car doors to the comfortless white day. From their Sunday visit weeks ago, she recalls vaguely the locations of things buried now in mist. That occasion was quiet, the harbor just scenery, backdrop for a property that had stirred Richard's speculative instincts. This morning, though, the fog is alive with the noises of gulls and boat engines, voices, and the on-again, off-again knock, knock, knock of hammers pounding nails down by the wharf.

The factory looming before them appears to account for the whole of visible space. Beginning flat on shore ledge, the blocky two-story structure continues onto pilings over the beach to suspend itself stupidly in fog. Low tide has disclosed the beach: a stony brown-green muck, that has become a graveyard for tires and muted artifacts of rust. A few of the pilings lean away from vertical. Crossmembers dangle or are missing altogether. But Richard dismisses these defects.

Now she stands at the door with her husband, who has entrusted her with the two flashlights. He waves a hand at the factory wall. "You notice the finish on this siding? You can't put it on like aluminum. Beautiful buildings are like fine wines—they take time."

She, too, certainly appreciates old things, the past's dusky reachings into the present. But what troubles her is this cosmetic interpretation: that what is acquired in age is essentially a "look."

Richard, entering, turns to her. "Watch where you step." Then he's off, like a museum tour guide, leading the way to a room jammed with rows and rows of packing tables.

Through the factory walls she can still hear gulls crying.

"I wonder what it would have been like," she says.

"What?"

"The women of this town—I imagine they spent a good part of their lives at these tables."

"Yeah." He shakes his head. "Cramming sardines into cans. Probably a couple dollars a day."

Down by the wharf, a carpenter's saw whines, and she is reminded that it is still foggy outside.

His flashlight beam jumps. "See?—kitchen in the middle, dining area around the sides, by the windows. Except for private parties and the lounge. They're upstairs."

From the last room, all the way at the back of the building, directly over the water, the cry of gulls is suddenly louder. At the window, she peers through the slits between the boards, out at the bright fog. Now again she hears voices from across by the wharf, heavily muffled by the mist, voices consisting only of vowels and rhythms.